

I knew from the first time I met Hristo that I was in the presence of man of special qualities. Not false qualities and manufactured achievements, carried around like advertisements, the way many academics present themselves, but the kind of qualities that are part of every act and every word, in every circumstance. On our first meeting two years ago in his office at the Department of Roma Studies in Nitra, he served me apple tea. He spoke to his sister on the phone in a language I did not recognize. He spoke to the department housekeeper, in Slovak, as an equal. He spoke to me from the first, in English, as a friend, though he had every reason to be suspicious of the motives of an American showing up at his door with little by way of introduction. His bookshelves were full of his many publications, and on the wall hung pictures of Romani children. Hristo is a man of many interests, countless friends and acquaintances, and multiple ongoing projects. More than anything, though, Hristo always has time for his friends, his students, colleagues, and whom-ever else asks for help. I don't know where he finds the energy to keep everything going, and the longer I have known Hristo, the more I have seen the cost to him of keeping all these balls in the air. I'm sure I'm not the only one of his friends to recommend that he let one or two of them drop, and take more care of himself.

While Hristo has produced much excellent scholarship, edits a new journal on Romani language and culture, and is a dedicated teacher, I want to focus on what I have witnessed of his ability to organize and lead diverse groups in important intellectual and political work. The first instance would perhaps seem the least momentous. I asked him the favor of speaking to a class of Slovak college students from the pedagogical faculty about issues in Romani education. I had spent several weeks with these students and knew well the difficulty they had in overcoming the pervasive social prejudice against the Roma, a prejudice that was more supported than discouraged in their own faculty, so I was apprehensive about what kinds of questions they might ask. And not all of them, as I expected, showed great sensitivity. But Hristo met them where they were, without the least antipathy, and shared with them his own story of growing up, a story I had not heard before. It was a story of overcoming, or persistence in the face of near constant frustration, of believing in oneself and not in what others might say. And we also learned that Hristo could sing! He created in this short time an atmosphere of mutual learning, and respect, and my students went away with, what for them, had been a unique experience. In subsequent classes, I could see the impact this meeting had had on them - not through epiphanies - but through small shifts in perspective and a new willingness to talk about education not from the point of view of the dominant party, but from the point of view of the students whose needs are not recognized or respected. This manifested itself in a frank, and tear-filled, dialogue about the experiences of being Hungarian in Slovak schools - an experience about which three of the students in the class had previously been silent. While this might not seem to bear much on the questions of discrimination against Roma students, for mainstream Slovaks the recognition of the point of view of any minority counts as a important step forward.